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Phoebe: Was she an early church leader?

By all accounts, the epistle of Romans is a masterpiece of Christian apologetics where, in a brilliant and logical manner, the apostle Paul lays out the case for the Christian belief of salvation through Jesus Christ alone. This belief was instrumental in the rise of the Christian community of believers called into existence purely through God's gracious love. While clearly rooted in the Old Testament idea of the "people of God," this was a new community and, as such, it powerfully challenged the various forms of racial, cultural, gender, and economic discrimination so prevalent in first-century Judaism and the larger society. Toward the end of the letter, in chapter 12, Paul lays down the ground rules according to which this new community should function. There we find that self-sacrifice and self-denial are essential elements of the Christian life, that each member of the body of Christ is to function according to the spiritual gifting bestowed by God, and, finally, that *agape* love is to be the primary value guiding the life of the community. Chapters 13–15 build on the groundwork established in chapter 12, and then chapter 16 concludes the book of Romans.

In this final chapter, Paul issues a series of greetings to both men and women, all of whom he considers his "co-workers in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 16:3; see also Phil. 4:3).¹ Among the

many individuals listed in this chapter, Phoebe, whom Paul refers to as "our sister," receives special recognition (Rom. 16:1, 2). Not only is Paul's discourse on Phoebe the first and longest in the chapter but also the words and allusions he uses to describe her and her ministry hint at the remarkable stature this woman had among the early Christians. For these reasons, Phoebe has fascinated Christian writers throughout the centuries, most of whom have written in an environment unfriendly to the ministry of women. Origen (c. A.D. 184–253) wrote that "this passage teaches two things at the same time: As we have said, women are to be considered ministers in the Church, and . . . ought to be received in the ministry."² A century or so later, the "golden-mouthed" John Chrysostom (c. A.D. 347–407) noted, "For how can the woman be else than blessed who has the blessing of so favourable a testimony from Paul, who had also the power to render assistance to him who had righted the whole world?"³ After the fourth century A.D., however, such statements became rare, as the Christian church moved towards a male-dominated ministry in the church.⁴

The role of Phoebe in early Christianity has been hotly debated throughout the centuries, ranging from views suggesting that her ministry was nothing more than that of a helper (or

patron) of the apostolic task, to those ascribing to her a significant ministerial role. As we shall see, this debate often influenced the biblical translations of the Greek words used by Paul to describe the ministry of this remarkable woman. In this article, I will focus on three aspects of Phoebe's ministry that flow from the text of Romans 16:1, 2: her ministry as a *diakonos*; her role as the letter bearer to the Romans; and finally, her role as a *prostatis*, which literally translates as "the one who stands before."

Phoebe as a deacon?

In Romans 16:1, Paul writes of Phoebe: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me."

There has been much discussion in Christian literature with regard to the word *servant*, which is a translation of the well-known Greek word *diakonos*, also translated as "deacon." The concept of a deacon was familiar to first-century society, referring primarily to household service; and in the New Testament, *diakonos*, at times, was used in conjunction with another Greek term, *doulos*, or slave.⁵ Reading the word *diakonos* from a modern-day perspective often obscures the fact

that, in Paul's day, the position of the servant was considered to be the lowest in society—people who were the menials and lackeys of the day. Thus, there exists a tension between the modern, ecclesiastical understanding and use of the word *deacon* and the ancient *diakonos*. It is this term as well as the word *doulos*, however, with all their cultural connotations that Christ adopted to describe His own ministry (Mark 10:45). Following Jesus' example, Paul used the words *diakonos* and *doulos* to describe Christ's ministry when he wrote in Romans 15:8: "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant [*diakonos*] of the Jews on behalf of God's truth" (see also Phil. 2:7 where Paul refers to Jesus as *doulos*). Paul repeatedly used the same word to describe his own ministry and that of his coworkers (see, e.g., 2 Cor. 3:6; 4:1; 6:4; 8:4).

Thus, we find it remarkable that just a few sentences later, in Romans 16:1, Paul refers to Phoebe as *diakonos*, essentially equating her *diakonia* (or service) with that of Christ as well as his own apostolic ministry. Also noteworthy is that the word *diakonos* in this passage is used in its masculine rather than feminine form.⁶ At that stage of Christian history, the Greek term for deaconess had not yet been coined. The distinctly feminine form *diakonissa* did not appear until the fourth century.⁷ Be that as it may, Paul's calling Phoebe a deacon appears to make her ministry as equally important and valid as that of other early church leaders, such as Tychicus (Eph. 6:21), Epaphras (Col. 1:7), and Timothy (1 Tim. 4:6). Otherwise, why would Paul use such a term in reference to a woman and create intentional misunderstanding?⁸

It must be pointed out, however, that in contrast to Paul, who functioned as *diakonos* in service to the entire church, Phoebe's *diakonia* seems to be specifically tied to the local church of Cenchreae. Being the only time the New Testament links such service directly to the local church suggests, for some commentators, that Phoebe was most likely involved in some sort of

recognized ministry or held a position of responsibility within her local house church.⁹ The case for Phoebe's functioning as such seems strengthened by Paul's use of another Greek word, *ousa* (being), which occurs together with the noun *diakonos*. The phrase indicating her as *being* a deacon denotes some sort of leadership position. Thus, it could be stated that Phoebe was probably the first recorded local church deacon in the history of Christianity.¹⁰ This being so, Paul's exhortation to bishops and deacons, found in 1 Timothy 3, would apply equally to Phoebe as to any other church leader of early Christianity.¹¹

Phoebe as a courier?

Careful exegetical, historical, and linguistic studies have led many commentators to conclude that Phoebe was actually the person whom Paul chose to deliver his letter to the Roman house churches.¹² While, to our modern eyes, the text is more implicit than explicit, Paul's words appear to be a recommendation for a letter bearer written according to first-century custom.¹³ The purpose of such a recommendation was to introduce the letter carrier to the congregation in Rome. Paul's letter to Philemon serves as another example of a similar recommendation, with Onesimus also functioning as a letter bearer.¹⁴ If Phoebe was indeed the carrier of the letter to the Romans, it would be natural for Paul to introduce and recommend her because she was obviously unknown to the believers in Rome. Being Paul's coworker and emissary, it is also probable that Phoebe read the letter to many Roman congregations and was able to provide commentary on everything that could have been misunderstood, thus providing needed clarifications. Additionally, knowing Paul well, she could provide the house churches of Rome with information regarding his personal needs and travel plans.¹⁵ All this raises a question: why would Paul make such a culturally questionable decision as choosing a woman to be his emissary? It is conceivable that Phoebe had proven herself to be a respected

and trustworthy church leader and whom Paul could entrust his message of salvation to the Gentile world. As one scholar commented, "Phoebe carried under the folds of her robe the whole future of Christian theology."¹⁶

Phoebe as a leader (*prostatis*)?

Romans 16:2 provides us with one more important piece of information about Phoebe that often tends to disappear in translation. There Paul calls Phoebe *prostatis*, literally, "the one who stands before." The New International Version renders the text this way: "for she has been the benefactor [*prostatis*] to many people, including me." Other versions translate the word variably as "patron" (ESV), "succourer" (KJV), "helper" (ASV; NASB), "she has been helpful to many" (NLT), or even "good friend" (TEV). There are, however, some translations that render *prostatis* as "leader" (YLT), "respected leader" (CEV), or "defender of many" (Emphasized Bible of J. B. Rotherdam, 1872).

The translators' disposition towards rendering *prostatis* as "helper" or "patron" appears to flow from a widespread conviction that Phoebe was nothing more than a rich woman who supported Paul and other missionary workers financially. This conclusion seems to be supported by the fact that, in antiquity, there existed women who, while they could not hold any public office, offered their patronage and financial help to various causes. Furthermore, the passage ends with "including me." According to these translators, if *prostatis* had meant more than being a "helper," it would have meant that at times Paul would have allowed others to exercise their gift of leadership in his presence and possibly even submit to their authority. This, according to hierarchical thinking, would not have been possible, as Paul would have outranked everyone in his presence (even in matters of local church governance), and particularly a woman.¹⁷

However, this kind of reasoning does not resolve the problem of why

Paul would use the word *prostatis* in his description of Phoebe if he could have simply called her a *boethos*, “helper” (Heb. 13:6) or said that she was *sumballo polu*, “being of great help” (Acts 18:27). Perhaps Phoebe was more than just a rich woman who desired to support the missionary work financially. To determine the veracity of this line of reasoning, we must follow the line of evidence that would unlock the meaning of the word *prostatis*.

The best way to begin is to look for the same word used in other passages of the New Testament. Unfortunately, *prostatis* happens to be a *hapax legomenon*, that is, it occurs only once in the New Testament as a noun. To discover the meaning of *prostatis*, we must thus look beyond the New Testament to sources such as the Septuagint, which was Paul’s Bible,¹⁸ and other ancient Greek literature as well as related words throughout Paul’s writings.

The masculine form of *prostatis* occurs more than once in the Septuagint. First Chronicles 27:31 lists Jaziz the Hagrite as one of the *prostates* or chief officials of King David’s court. The same word is also listed in 1 Chronicles 29:6 where *prostatai* (plural of *prostates*) were “the officials in charge of the king’s work.” Similarly, 2 Chronicles 8:10 and 24:11 use the word to designate “King Solomon’s chief officials,” who were given charge of workers and/or money. The English Standard Version renders 2 Chronicles 8:10 this way: “And these were the chief officers of King Solomon, 250, who exercised authority over the people.” When the word is used in the Septuagint, therefore, it tends to signify some kind of leadership function.

Prostates also frequently appears in ancient nonbiblical literature. For Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), it designated a person who stood before others as a “democratic leader” or “protector of the people.”¹⁹ Subsequent historical evidence testifies to the existence of specially selected persons in many Greek cities who functioned as champions or defenders of the poorer citizenry. These people were charged with


protecting citizens against the attacks of the chief magistrates in power or the richer classes. They would also defend the underprivileged in courts and functioned as guardians of peace and constitutional liberty.²⁰ *Prostates* was also known to be a common term used among the Greeks for presidents of various secular or religious associations.²¹ The same term could also be applied to defenders or champions of Greek cities in times of need or warfare.²² At times, entire cities were considered as *prostates* of other cities or regions. For example, between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C., Sparta and Athens jostled for the position of the leading city (*prostates*) in the region and the protector of peace.²³

Evidence from ancient inscriptions indicates that in Egypt and, eventually, in Rome the word *prostates* had already become a word of choice for synagogue leadership among Diaspora Jewry prior to the birth of Christ. In this way, *prostates* functioned as an equivalent of the Hebrew *rosh ha-knesset* (the head of the synagogue).²⁴ Inscriptional evidence also indicates that in Rome *prostates* served as a technical term for the leader or president of the Jewish community.²⁵ We can reasonably assume that Paul, being a Hellenistic Jew and growing up in the Diaspora, was thoroughly familiar with the Greek concept of the *prostates* as the champion, defender, or presiding officer of the community. This would also mean that when the Christian leaders in Rome received Phoebe, they were aware that she was a Christian leader in her own standing.

The most interesting line of evidence, however, suggesting that Phoebe might have been much more than just a helper, comes from Paul’s own writings. While *prostatis* as a noun occurs only once in the New Testament, its other forms, such as *proistemi*, appear several times. The first time *prostatis* appears in the New Testament in another form is in Romans 12:8 in Paul’s list of gifts from the Holy Spirit: “if it is to lead [*proistamenos*], do it diligently.” Speaking of elders, Paul encourages the Thessalonians

“to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you [*proistamenous*] in the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:12). Most importantly, in 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul uses the verb form of *prostatis* when he writes, “The elders [*proestotes presbuteroi*, i.e., “those elders who stand before”] who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.”

How is it, then, that most versions seem to water down this important word *prostatis* and view Phoebe simply as a “helper”? Why not, following the Contemporary English Version, use “respected leader”? The most likely answer to these questions is that perhaps the translators may have felt uncomfortable with a notion that a woman could carry any leadership or presiding role in the early Christian church. We believe it conceivable that Phoebe may have been an important leader among the ancient Christians, who led a congregation in Cenchreae and served so well that Paul was willing to let her run the affairs of the church in his presence and entrusted to her the precious epistle of Romans to carry to the Christians in Rome.

A careful reading of Romans 16:1, 2, thus, offers us a new glance at this remarkable woman who appears to be a close associate of Paul in spreading the gospel of Christ; who served as a leader of her house church in Cenchreae; who, despite all the dangers associated with travel on Roman roads, accepted the task of carrying the message of salvation to the Roman church; and who was recognized by Paul and others as a Christian leader in her own right. 

1 Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture passages are from the New International Version.

2 Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, bks. 6–10 of *The Fathers of the Church*, tr. and ed. Thomas P. Scheck (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 291.

3 John Chrysostom, “Homilies on Romans 30.2,” in *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841), 478.

4 Gerald Lewis Bray, ed., *Romans*, vol. 6 of *Ancient Commentary on Scripture, New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 355.

5 Although the words *diakonos* and *doulos* carry different meanings

in literature, they were often used by both Paul and Jesus interchangeably. See, e.g., Matt. 20:25–28; 22:1–14; Mark 10:43–45; Phil. 1:1; and 1 Cor. 3:5. In Col. 1:7 and 4:12, Epaphras is called *diakonos* and *doulos* respectively. Cf. Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 179. For a thorough discussion on the differences between the words *diakonos* and *doulos*, see Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, ed., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), s.vv. “*diakonos*,” “*doulos*.”

6 This fact should put to rest the argument taken from 1 Tim. 3:2, 12 regarding Paul’s statement that bishops and deacons must be “the husband of but one wife” to mean that only men can function as bishops or deacons.

7 The technical term *diakonissa* appears for the first time in Christian literature in canon 19 of the First Council of Nicaea. There are no known earlier versions of the term. Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 286.

8 Denis Fortin notes the inconsistency in how various versions translate the word *diakonos* in reference to Phoebe. While most translators have no problem with translating the word *diakonos* as “minister” in reference to Paul and other early leaders in the church, no translation uses the term in reference to Phoebe. Only the words *servant*, *deacon*, or *deaconess* are used. Fortin sees this as a “strange bias against women in ministry.” Denis Fortin, “Was Phoebe a Deacon, a Servant, or a Minister?” *Memory, Meaning & Faith* (blog), April 25, 2010, <http://www.memorymeaningfaith.org/blog/2010/04/phoebe-deacon-servant-or-minister.html>.

9 James Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, vol. 38B of Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1988), 886, 887; Kevin Giles, *Patterns of Ministry Among the First Christians* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1989), 56.

10 Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 887.

11 At the same time, warns James Dunn, it would be anachronistic to read into the New Testament our understanding of an established office of episcopate or diaconate “as though a role of responsibility and authority, with properly appointed succession, had already been agreed upon in the Pauline churches.” Ibid.; cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 787.

12 The notion that Phoebe was, in fact, Paul’s courier has been strongly affirmed in contemporary exegetical literature on Romans. See, e.g., ibid., 786.

13 For a careful study of Christian passages of commendation and their comparison with contemporary non-Christian examples, see Chan-Hie Kim, *Form and Structure of the Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation* (Missoula, MT: University of Montana Press, 1972), 50–60; also see Harry Gamble, *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 44, 84, 85.

14 Chan-Hie Kim, *Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation*, 120–134.

15 Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 569.

16 Quoted in Brenda Poinsett, *She Walked With Jesus: Stories of Christ Followers in the Bible* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2004), 192.

17 Although the New Testament indicates that the original apostles

carried a special authority within the community of faith, this does not preclude the possibility that, once established, local communities had freedom to govern themselves without external interferences.

18 Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*, 5th ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 20–24.

19 P. J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 447, 97.

20 Abel Hendy Jones Greenidge, *A Handbook of Greek Constitutional History* (London: Macmillan, 1896), 188.

21 Margaret H. Williams, “The Structure of Roman Jewry Reconsidered: Were the Synagogues of Ancient Rome Entirely Homogenous?” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 104 (1994): 138; cf. Franz Poland, *Geschichte des griechischen Vereinswesens* (Leipzig: Zentral-Antiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1967), 363–367.

22 Peter Liddel, “Democracy Ancient and Modern,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Ryan K. Balot (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 138.

23 Kurt A. Raaflaub, *The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 169; cf. Tōru Yūge and Masaaki Doi, *Forms of Control and Subordination in Antiquity* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 575.

24 Joseph Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt: From Rameses II to Emperor Hadrian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 96; cf. Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 115.

25 Williams, “The Structure of Roman Jewry,” 138.

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A sample prayer for revival and reformation

In the prayer of Jesus while He was at Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–39), we learn the following principles for an effective prayer life for revival.

First, others should join with you in prayer. Jesus, the Master of the universe, prayed with His disciples when He was faced with the great assignment of saving our world. We must also be ready to pray in groups to sustain the vibrancy needed for our prayer life.

Second, seek a place away from distractions, where your heart can be in tune with God while praying. From the above text, Jesus went to

Gethsemane. Revival is delayed when we allow worldly distractions during our time of intimacy with God.

Third, a “burden” must be developed to have an effective prayer life. As soon as Jesus got to Gethsemane, He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with Him (vv. 37, 38). He began to tell them His overwhelming trouble—a burden for the salvation of the world.

Fourth, there are the words “going a little farther . . . As important as building a prayer life with like minds is, an individual responsibility also arises. Each person should take

personal responsibility for his or her prayer life to birth a godly revival.

Fifth, the last part of verse 39 tells us that we need to pray for God’s will to be done. Doing so may lead us into places we never imagined.

Through it all, let us always pray for revival.

—ABIOYE OLUDARE DAVID, MA, IS
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Revival
and
REFORMATION